THE MORTON ARBORETUM

Joy Morton, founder LISLE, ILLINOIS

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TREES OF THE MORTON ARBORETUM (DECIDUOUS) XII

Diospyros virginiana L., Common Persimmon

Anyone who has had the experience of biting into an unripe persimmon is apt to retain forever a degree of suspicion as to the edibility of the enticing appearing fruit. But, another sampling made later on in the fall after the skin has shrivelled and the pulp softened is almost certain to result in an immediate re-evaluation for the better.

To those familiar with the persimmon's botanical background, it may come as a second surprise to find it thriving and fruiting this far north. For, it is a member of the Ebony Family (*Ebenaceae*), a group comprising six genera and almost 300 species, predominantly tropical. Persimmons were included among the original plantings made in the Morton Arboretum in 1922, by now fruiting sized trees providing a generous bounty equally appreciated by birds, animals and man.

There is a curious fascination about the name, persimmon, which is of Virginia Indian origin. The generic name, *Diospyros,* translated from the Greek, means "Jove's grain", "the fruit of Jove" or figuratively, "food for the gods", while *"virginiana"* denotes geographical distribution. The range is considerably broader than the name implies, extending along the Atlantic coast from southern Connecticut to Florida and across southern Pennsylvania, southern Ohio and westward to southwestern Iowa, Kansas and Texas. The persimmon's stature varies according to location, from a small, irregular tree forming extensive thickets in abandoned fields and along fence rows to tall, straight-trunked specimens which in fertile valleys of southern Indiana and Illinois may reach 100 feet and attain trunk diameters of 2 or 3 ft. An oval or round-headed tree with wide-angled, contorted branches, slender, zig-zag, often pendulous twigs, and dark, reddish-brown bark which separates into thick, checkered blocks, it is easily recognized during the dormant season. In addition to its arresting winter aspect, the tree affords dense shade from early spring to October. This is provided by rich green oval leaves from 4 to 6 inches long, lustrous on their upper surfaces, paler beneath and somewhat leathery in texture. They are borne on thick,

usually downy petioles which often permit the blades to droop. Their autumnal coloring is variable, being either yellow suffused with orange and purple or not changing at all.

One will find little of ornamental interest in the small, yellowish-green flowers making their appearance at the time the leaves are about half expanded, but in late October or November when the distinctive red-cheeked, orange colored persimmons cling ripe on the branches, we see the tree at its best. The globular fruit, botanically a "berry", varies from 1 to 1½ inches in diameter, is tipped at its apex with the remnants of the flower pistil and sits squat on the thick, enlarged calyx. The pulp by then is juicy and sweet, having lost its earlier puckery quality and astringency. As many as 8 hard, flat, brown seeds are embedded in the flesh of each fruit.

In planting persimmons one of the most important things to remember is that the tree is dioecious (male and female flowers born on separate trees), thereby necessitating the presence of both sexes to insure fruit. Good drainage is perhaps more important than soil although a light, sandy loam is preferred. A sunny location and some shelter are also recommended.

Oxydendrum arboreum (L.) DC, Sourwood, Sorrel Tree

With the northern limits of its range not quite reaching the southern tip of the state, one would scarcely expect the Sourwood to adapt itself to the climatic vagaries of the Chicago region. It is still more surprising that it should do here when we consider its family relationship, the Heaths *(Ericaceae),* being for the most part very exacting in their acid soil requirements. So encouraging has been the behavior of two plants set out for trial on the gravelly north slope of Hemlock Hill in 1939, however, that others have since been added to the collection.

Opinion may vary as to which feature is most outstanding, the flowers or foilage, but at this season when the leaves have changed to flaming scarlet, the latter wins almost universal approval. Deservedly, too, for from the time they unfold bronzy green in the spring the leaves are never lacking in interest. In summer we admire their rich green color, lustre, and leathery texture, and note their lighter undersurfaces, sharply toothed margins and the distinctive angle at which the lateral veins meet the midribs. Though larger, from 2 to 5 inches long and up to 1½ in. in width, there is something in the manner in which they are poised that suggests peach leaves, a characteristic aiding identification in the wild. The sour, acid flavor of both foilage and stems is another earmark and the one responsible for the botanical name, *"oxy",* a Greek derivation meaning "sour" and *"dendron",* "tree".

The Sourwood has the desirable habit of commencing to flower while still a small tree, a fact sure to be appreciated. Normally midsummer blooming, the tiny, creamy-white, urn-shaped bells appear in spreading, and slightly drooping compound clusters 6 to 8 inches long, massed at the ends of the leafy shoots. Their appearance somewhat suggests lily-of-the-valley. After a period of effectiveness lasting for several weeks,

the floral interest is replaced by that of the conical, grayish-tan fruits which persist through most of the winter. Each capsule contains numerous seeds.

Always of slow growth, and rarely taller than 30 to 40 feet with trunk diameters up to 8 or 12 inches, the tree exceeds these dimensions only in Tennessee, on the west slops of the Smokies. Elsewhere it remains small and oval-headed, an inhabitant of woodlands and woodland margins from Pennsylvania to Florida and westward to Indiana and Louisiana.

There is a real need in landscaping for multiple-interest small trees like the Sourwood, and given a chance it can contribute much to the beauty of its surroundings. An evergreen background will show it off most effectively.

E. L. Kammerer

Oxydendrum arboreum (L.) DC, the Sourwood or Sorrel Tree, planted at the base of Hemlock Hill.

Diospyros virginiana L., Common Persimmon, on the west lawn of the Arboretum Center Grounds.

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